

SPECIAL  
REPORT

ABOVE Instructor Mike Rains (right) training Iraqi and Iranian archaeologists to use the Integrated Archaeological Data-Base, in Sulaimaniyah Antiquities Directorate, Iraq.

MIDDLE A visit to the famous Upper Palaeolithic cave site of Zarzi, Iraq. Left to right: Roger Matthews, Abbas Motarjem, Yaghoub Mohammadifar, Mike Rains, Hassan Fazeli Nashli, Wendy Matthews

RIGHT Roger Matthews (right) informing the group about the current programme of excavations at the Early Neolithic site of Bestansur, Iraq, in the Central Zagros Archaeological Project ([www.czap.org](http://www.czap.org))

# Archaeology as cultural diplomacy

UK, Iraqi, and Iranian archaeologists are uniting for the sake of preserving world heritage. Is this, Roger Matthews asks, a model for future international relationships in areas of conflict?

While diplomatic and political relations between the UK and Iran falter, and UK politicians continue to place obstacles – including an isolationist policy of visa issuance – in the way of international interactions, a group of archaeologists from the UK, Iraq, and Iran has been quietly going about their business in pursuit of shared academic aims. By doing so, they are making small but significant steps in the direction of cultural engagement across political borders, both real and imaginary.

With this in mind, I set up the programme RADII: Recording Archaeological Data from Iraq and Iran along with Hassan Fazeli Nashli of the University of Tehran, and supported by the British Academy's International Partnership scheme. It ran for three years from Spring 2010, and involved intensive sessions of training in use of the Integrated Archaeological Data Base or IADB – a popular platform for recording of archaeological information from excavated sites, which enables integration and analysis of data from multiple lines of evidence. These training sessions were conducted by Mike Rains of York Archaeological Trust, the creator of the IADB, initially in London in 2010, then in Ankara, Turkey, in 2012, and finally in Sulaimaniyah, Iraq, in Spring 2013.

The original aim of RADII was to bring small groups of Iraqi and Iranian archaeologists to the UK for short spells of training in use of the IADB. However, the prohibitive expense incurred in securing the appropriate visas for the three Iranian and three Iraqi attendees who came to London in 2010 forced us to rethink future locations for such events. In 2012, the training session was held in Ankara, Turkey, with a further small group of visiting archaeologists. The biggest and most successful session took place in February 2013 in Sulaimaniyah city, in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

area of Iraq. Travel costs were low, and Iranian visitors were allowed into Iraq without expensive visas. As a result, we were joined by eight Iranian archaeologists from archaeology departments in Iranian universities that included Bu Ali Sina and Tehran, as well as from the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research.

Twelve Iraqi participants arrived from all three provinces of the KRG: Sulaimaniyah, Erbil, and Dohuk. They included staff members from the universities of Sulaimaniyah and Salahaddin at Erbil, as well as museum and antiquities staff from all three provinces. The session was hosted by Kamal Rasheed Raheem, Director of Sulaimaniyah Antiquities Directorate and took place in the library reading room.

Morning training sessions were followed by trips to nearby archaeological sites, including our current excavations for the Central Zagros Archaeological Project at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Bestansur on the Shahrizor Plain, the Upper Palaeolithic cave site of Zarzi, and the Iron Age rock-cut tomb at Qizkapan. New relationships between archaeologists from the three participating countries were forged during the training sessions and the site visits, as well as through the shared meals and bus journeys.

This was the first time that archaeologists from the UK, Iran, and Iraq have worked together: there was much discussion about possible future projects in the field, in libraries, and in museums, and all participants hope that this will now serve as a platform for future cultural engagement. ■

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